

SFPT Simpson's Fromus Valley report, May 2014

The River Fromus is at a standstill once more, and the swirling torrent that grew from the winter downpours is just a memory. The river is now just a necklace of small isolated pools, but you can see the highwater mark of the winter spate in the form of debris on small, sandy beaches and caught up on overhanging branches. It would be interesting to know what aquatic wildlife can survive in such a difficult and unreliable home.

Wild plants distribute their seeds in a variety of very efficient ways. In the heat of a perfect May day, a gentle breeze was wafting the parachutes of dandelion seeds from their 'clocks' into the warm air where they joined the cotton-wool seeds of willows and sallows, and headed for the blue horizon. Air travel is good, but travelling by water is another reliable option. Here and there along the course of the Fromus in the lower meadows you will find water figwort. It is a statuesque plant, with square, reddish stems and small maroon flowers that are rich in nectar for bees and other insects. It is perennial, and I suspect that for years the river has carried away its seeds in times of spate, to form new colonies miles away, downriver. A beetle — the figwort weevil — is entirely dependent upon figwort for its survival.

The cattle have departed, and in one place the bank of the river is churned by their hooves. Here, charlock, bristly ox tongue, common winter cress and redshank are growing together. These plants are not meadow plants: they are arable weeds, and just possibly their seeds were carried in the mud on the hooves of cattle last year.

Meadow buttercups are turning some of the meadows to gold, and mixed with them are ladies smock, lesser stitchwort, lesser yellow trefoil, thyme-leaved speedwell, germander speedwell and a few southern marsh orchids. Grasses in flower at the moment include meadow foxtail, sweet vernal grass, cocksfoot and Yorkshire fog.

The hedgerows flanking the meadows are dense, wide and quite superb for wildlife. Hawthorn flowers are waning, just as the first pink flowers of dog rose are opening. Blackthorn flowers are long gone, and leafy young suckers are prominent along the edges of several meadows. They are very capable of swallowing up grassland and wild flowers, and that is why stalwart, veteran Guardians recently made a determined effort to dig out a few. The invading blackthorn suckers are potentially a serious problem.

Laurie Forsyth